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THE ORTHOGRAPHY OF THE UNITS OF THE FRENCH
METRIC SYSTEM.

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The adoption of the metric system, or at least its partial adoption, by the convention appointed to make arrangements for the revision of the United States Pharmacopœia, necessitates the consideration of the orthography of the units.

There would be no necessity for this consideration were it not for the fact that the tendency, under the guise of phonetic reform, to alter the original spelling is very marked.

The American metric bureau has rendered yeoman service in introducing the system into our country. The enterprise, energy and good business management which characterizes this agency is well known, and yet, in the writer's opinion, a great mistake has been committed in altering the original orthography of the units.

When the various countries throughout the world adopted the metric system certain changes were made in the names of the units and in the various denominations in a few nations, in order to adapt them to the language of each individual country, to satisfy a caprice, because of an antipathy to the French nation, or for some political reason. In the Netherlands, for instance, the metric system has been in use since 1871, but with Dutch names—strup, duim, elle, roede, korrel, lood, ons, etc. But can it be justly said that reason has been consulted in making the trivial changes that the United States proposes to adopt?

Metre, litre and gramme are to be changed to *meter*, *liter* and *gram*. It cannot be said that the change is made in order to conform to the language of the country, for we have no American language, and our mother-tongue, the English, resolutely rejects the parallel Americanisms *center* for *centre*, *theater* for *theatre*, etc., and thus the plea of common usage cannot be upheld, nor can it be said that the United States, as a nation, has any antipathy for the French, and the notion that politics had a hand in authorizing the change cannot be entertained here; it must have been *caprice*.

Let us look a little more closely at the individual changes proposed. *Meter* for *metre*.

It cannot be said that the Websterian innovation is any shorter, we have in each case the same number of letters. Webster, in his dictionary, gives both ways of spelling it. The Latin word, *metrum*,



and the Greek, μέτρον (a measure), are the sources of its derivation; the same word in French is, of course, *metre*, pronounced mǎ'tr. As a measure of length, and the foundation of the metrical system, the word belongs to the French, for it originated with them in this signification. Now why should the etymology be destroyed by an alteration which does not substitute a simpler word, but merely changes the position of the last two letters?

Besides this we have the well-known and common English word *meter*, which does not mean a measure, but a *measurer*, an instrument for measuring, as gas-meter, water-meter, coal-meter. Now, all will agree that one of the greatest faults of the English language is, that we have so many words spelt and pronounced alike, yet with different significations. Would it not be much better to keep *meter* for a measurer and retain *metre* for a measure? *Litre* is a French word from the Greek λίτρα (a silver coin) it is proposed to spell it *liter*, and there is even less ground for the change here, as the word *litre* originated entirely with the French, and was not known before they applied it to the measure of capacity in the metrical system. Yet probably, for consistency, so long as the caprice was decided upon in the case of *metre*, the last two letters here must be transposed.

Gramme, the unit of weight, is the only term which is shortened by the proposed change, the last two letters are to be entirely dropped, and it is to be spelt *gram*.

But we have a positive and serious objection to the use of this mutilated term in pharmacy; it unfortunately happens that the script letter *m* is very easily rendered *in*, and that this would frequently happen in reading prescriptions there is no doubt. Grams and grains differ greatly in value—one weight is fifteen and a half times the other, and in the dangerous transition stage which must come as the system is introduced—it makes one shudder to think that the life of a patient may then hang upon the clear and distinct dotting of the *i*. {grams.}
{grains.} On the other hand it cannot be said that abbreviations would be used, and that a physician would not write out either grams or grains, but abbreviate. This could not be done safely, as *gr.* is the abbreviation for grains, the difference between the abbreviation *Gr.*, for grammes and *gr.*, for grains is not sufficient to designate them. The only safe plan is to use the word *grammes* and spell it out, and instead of the decimal point use a decimal line. Every practical pharmacist can recall the moment of doubt and uncertainty during his professional life when the

prescription hastily written by the physician at the bedside of his patient (it may be under difficulties better appreciated than described) is presented to be deciphered; when the choice between the illy-contrived cabalistic characters \bar{z} and z must be hastily and unerringly decided upon; the messenger is in haste, and hesitancy and delay are regarded as evidences of incompetency, and yet if there is to be an element of uncertainty about a new system, why throw away the old with which we are familiar to take up an imperfect new one.

The metric system has been adopted by the Pharmacopœial convention. The subject of orthography is by no means an unimportant one, and let us by all means retain the original words and keep the whole system in its perfection.

It is common in the English language to have the termination *re—meagre, massacre, ogre, acre, lucre, nacre, calibre, accoutre*—and even Bostonians, the inhabitants of that great centre of literary excellence, of which they are justly proud, where the Websterian innovations flourish best—still spell French words, which have been engrafted in the English language, with the original orthography, and they still go to the theatre and spell it *re* without a protest. We have hundreds of French words in our language that have become firmly established, and none will deny that they are elegant, expressive and forcible, whilst their extensive and growing use must prove that they supply a real need. Who would wish to discard such words as *depot, bouquet, beau, dessert*, etc., and how could their places be filled? and hundreds of others could be named if necessary. Prof. James Hadley, of Yale, in an article in Webster on a “Brief History of the English Language,” after describing in a very interesting way the manner in which French words were introduced in our language, remarks: “In the schools it is stated that during the first half of the fourteenth century French was still used as the language of instruction and the medium for learning Latin, but that during the last half of the same century the English gradually took its place. Now, English, as spoken by the higher classes who learned it, would naturally be intermixed with French expressions. It would have been otherwise if they had regarded the English as a superior language, as having a finer nature, or a higher cultivation than their own. But they doubtless felt that by an intermixing of French they were enriching and ennobling an unrefined and meagre¹ idiom. Whenever the French word, which rose to their mind, bore a shade of meaning for which they had no equivalent in

¹QUERY.—Why does one of the editors of Webster himself prefer in composition to use the *re* termination—meagre instead of meager—yet recommends others to use meager in the body of the book?

English, they did not content themselves with a loose expression, nor did they endeavor to form by English analogy one that should be exact; *they employed the French word itself*. They did this even when the English offered an equivalent expression, if the French word was particularly recommended by interesting or agreeable associations. *For words of a technical character they would scarcely think of seeking equivalents in English*. The body of the English people hearing from their superiors the French words with the Saxon, they naturally imitated and adopted them. Thus the new importations, bearing the stamp of elegance and fashion, passed from the circles of polite society into the language of the vulgar. They found free entrance into works of literature, not only because they *supplied real deficiencies in the English vocabulary*,¹ but also because they were especially familiar and acceptable to those classes whom the author would most wish to interest and please."

Now, having shown from abundant evidence that we have many precedents for the use of French words in our language with their original orthography retained, that the proposed changes do not, except in one instance—gram—shorten the terms, and that in this case the shortening is likely to be a dangerous experiment, there is yet another point of view in which the change is objectionable: These terms *metre*, *litre* and *gramme* have been established nearly a century; they are now in use by millions, representing the highest civilization of the world, and does it not seem petty and trivial to practically say: Yes, we Americans adopt the metrical system; it is perfect in all of its principles; the inter-relation of the standards is so unique; we have never had it in any other system, and Sumner was right when he crystallized its merits in the following language: "Universality, uniformity, precision, significance, brevity and completeness; a system of weights and measures born of philosophy rather than chance," and yet we must improve it *a little*. We have tried hard, yet cannot pick a flaw in its symmetrical proportions, nor suggest a change in its beautiful adaptation to our wants; yet there is one small chance left, we will phoneticize it, and confine our improvement to changing the spelling of the last two letters in the units. The French are, in all honesty, entitled to whatever credit is due for originating the most perfect system of weights and measures yet devised, and do not let us, as a nation, rob them of even this little leaf from their chaplet—the *original orthography*.

¹ Italics mine.

